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AUTHOR Coughlin, Mimi  
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## ABSTRACT

A study explored the underlying narratives, public and personal, that shape subject matter in U.S. history. It drew on strategies used in grounded theory, life history, and narrative inquiry. It specifically sought stories that history teachers teach students about what in the past matters and why. Teachers (n=62) from 32 schools were surveyed in a small northeastern state about personal histories, purposes, and priorities for teaching U.S. history. In-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample of participants (n=10). The first section of this paper outlines the epistemological, cultural, and political debates that have surrounded historical scholarship and history education during the past three decades and the competing narratives about U.S. history that they have produced. The paper's second section explores the influence of personal narratives on the U.S. history curriculum that teachers construct in their classrooms. The paper notes that examining teaching and learning history as a dynamic space, where knowledge is constructed within a context of conflicting public and compelling personal narratives, allows these curricular influences to be fruitfully explored. (Contains 51 references.) (BT)

## Teaching History: Personal and Public Narratives

Mimi Coughlin

Brown University

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In this study I explore the underlying narratives, both public and personal, that shape subject matter in United States history. The first section of this paper outlines the epistemological, cultural, and political debates that have surrounded historical scholarship and history education during the past three decades and the competing narratives about United States history they have produced. The second section explores the influence of personal narratives on the United States history curriculum that teachers construct in their own classrooms. Examining teaching and learning history as a dynamic space where knowledge is constructed within a context of conflicting public narratives and compelling personal ones, allows these curricular influences to be fruitfully explored.

### Public Narratives

What counts as history and why are questions that have been repeatedly raised in scholarly and curricular debates over the past three decades (Cornbleth & Waugh, 1999; Levine, 1996; Nash, Crabtree & Dunn, 1997). Disparate narratives reflect competing ideological orientations toward the representation of an “American” past. Central to arguments about the content and purpose of teaching United States history, are answers to fundamentally narrative questions like: what is the story?; who are the protagonists?; what are the principal conflicts?

Defenders of the canon contend that the central narrative of United States history is the triumphant expression of the Western tradition in the American political and economic system (Gagnon, 1988). Those who challenge the canon characterize this narrative as a popular myth that represents and perpetuates a particular hierarchy of knowledge and power. These scholars seek multiple truths and multiple experiences that

abridge the meta-narrative of American progress (Huggins, 1995; Loewen, 1995; Kerber, Kessler-Harris, & Sklar, 1995).

Much of the recent scholarship in history has sought to expose Eurocentric and androcentric bias in the canon and provide alternative histories of the American experience from the perspectives of workers, women, and non-Anglo people (Acuña, 1988; Bodnar, 1985; Lerner, 1979; Levine, 1977; Limerick, 1987, Nash, 1974; Takaki, 1993, Zinn, 1980). These challenges to the status quo have been denounced as cultural and political attacks against the foundations of American identity and ideals (Atlas, 1990; Himmelfarb, 1987; Kimball, 1990; Schlesinger, 1998; Stotsky, 1999). The rancor brought to these arguments underscores the ideological nature of national histories. Efforts to represent United States history to the next generation of citizens stir deeply held beliefs and unresolved tensions about who and what should count in the American past, present, and future.

In K-12 education the “back-to-basics” reform initiatives in the 1980s and 1990s rejected much of the new scholarship on women and racial and ethnic groups as peripheral to the core knowledge that schools should transmit. Anxiety that a lack of traditional historical knowledge (Ravitch & Finn, 1987) would erode national pride and that multiculturalism would “disunite” America (Schlesinger, 1998) spawned efforts to fortify traditional history education (Gagnon & The Bradley Commission, 1989).

Tensions between competing political, cultural and academic interests that are at the heart of rival narratives of United States history manifest themselves in such curricular particulars as textbook content and illustrative teaching examples. In California, for example, the debate over which version of American history should be taught to the nation’s students erupted in the summer of 1991 over the adoption of a

series of elementary social studies textbooks which were developed by Houghton Mifflin to adhere to the California curricular framework approved in 1988 (History-Social Science Curriculum Framework and Criteria Committee).

Opponents conceded that the authors of the Houghton Mifflin series attempted to include the diverse histories of as many groups as possible in the textbooks but complained that a “triumphalist upward and west-ward story” (Gitlin, 1995, p. 4) remained the core narrative. Joyce King, professor of education at Santa Clara University and a member of the state’s curriculum commission, argued that the story these curricula were telling about the American past was fundamentally flawed.

The idea was to see everyone in a single great narrative, but the narrative itself is faulty...the concept of the United States as a nation of immigrants fits Europeans well, but it barely fits Native Americans and it doesn’t fit blacks at all. (quoted in Kirp, 1991, p. 22)

On the national level, the controversy surrounding *National Standards for United States History* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1994) brought the debate regarding which version(s) of United States history should be taught to American children into the spotlight of national media attention. Lynne Cheney, who enabled the creation of the *Standards* by funding the project while chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, launched an aggressive public relations attack on the *Standards* in the pages of the Wall Street Journal prior to the official release of the document (Cheney, 1994). Cheney contended that the authors of the *Standards* neglected the most important figures in United States in favor of increased attention to women and minorities.

According to Cheney, Harriet Tubman, the Seneca Falls Convention, the American Federation of Labor, and the Ku Klux Klan received too much coverage at the

expense of J.P. Morgan, Thomas Edison, and the Wright Brothers (Cheney, 1994). Cheney quarreled not only with the historical actors the authors chose to highlight but also with what she considered to be the corruption of the essential story line. Cheney expressed the conviction that United States history curriculum should be a vehicle for celebration rather than criticism insisting “We are better people than the National Standards indicate, and our children deserve to know it” (Cheney, 1994).

Conservative critics of the *Standards* repeated Cheney’s analysis regarding its coverage of particular aspects of American history and particular Americans to similarly advocate for the equation between the canon and national pride (Krauthammer, 1994; Leo, 1994). In turn, the authors of the *Standards* complained that Cheney’s focus on the specific people and events that were suggested as teaching examples deliberately misrepresented the document (Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1997).

Although the *Standards* were intended to be voluntary guidelines, the controversy surrounding the *Standards* illustrates the ideologically charged nature of subject matter in United States history. Debate about details of curricular content was characterized in the media as nothing short of a cultural war. The political eclipse of whatever educational merit the *Standards* may have contained was complete with the dramatic rejection of the document by a vote of 99 to 1 on the floor of the Senate following a speech by Senator Slade Gorton accusing the authors of attempting to “destroy our Nation’s mystic chords of memory” (Nash, Crabtree, & Dunn, 1997, p. 234).

High school United States history teachers, thus, find their work at the center of a contentious ideological battle about the identity of a nation and about which and whose version(s) of the American story should be told to the next generation of citizens. The extent to which transformations within academic history and controversies surrounding

K-12 curriculum affect how teachers approach the subject is not well understood and has not been the focus of much research.

### Methodology, Data Sources and Analysis

To understand the personal and localized contexts of the narratives about United States history that teachers employ in their teaching I drew on strategies used in grounded theory, life history, and narrative inquiry (Creswell, 1998). In this project I specifically sought stories that history teachers tell themselves and their students about what in the past matters and why. My research focus was on what do teachers' beliefs about history have to do with who they are and how they perceive themselves within public narratives of United States narratives. Narrative approaches have been used by educational researchers to explore stories that teachers tell in making sense of their lives and their teaching and are useful in understanding the construction of knowledge and curriculum (Carter, 1993; Casey, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 2000; Cole, 1994; Elbaz, 1990; Goodson, 1992; McEwan & Egan, 1995, Muchmore, 1999).

Sixty-two teachers from 32 different schools completed written questionnaires in response to an invitation to participate in this study that was extended to all United States history teachers in a small Northeastern state. The survey elicited data about the participants' life and family histories and their purposes and priorities for teaching United States history. Numerical analyses were used to identify emergent themes in the close-ended responses. In-depth phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 1991) were then conducted with a purposeful sample of 10 participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Interviewees were encouraged to reflect on their experiences of learning history in school and on their life-long learning of history outside of school. Biographical and other influences that shaped teachers' approaches to the subject with the particular students

they taught were elicited. The interviews were open-ended and narrative seeking, with a focus on the life experiences and family histories of the participants as they related to their teaching objectives.

The open-ended survey responses and interview transcripts were coded using the “constant comparative method” to move between data and theory generation in an iterative and inductive process that is characteristic of grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1998). To retain context and the continuity of participant’s responses I also analyzed the data holistically (Patton, 1990). Using narrative techniques, I looked at all available data from each participant as a story that structures and communicates meaning when taken together (Mischler, 1986; Reissman, 1993). The focus of these analyses was on the narratives teachers construct in describing themselves and their approaches to teaching United States history.

### Personal Narratives

The data collected in this study support the assertion that who teachers say they are, how they understand particular historical content, and what they say they do with this knowledge in their history classrooms are related phenomena. This study illuminates the role that informal sources of knowledge and personal experience play in the ways teachers describe the curricular and instructional approaches they favor in their United States History classrooms. I argue that personal knowledge, which incorporates aspects of experience, identity, affiliation, and idiosyncratic interests, fundamentally influences the ideological orientation that teachers bring to subject matter in United States history. These orientations in turn influence teachers’ pedagogical intentions. A complete summary of the finding of this study are presented elsewhere (Coughlin, 2002; Coughlin, 2003). In this paper I will focus on two teachers, Robert and Martin, and the personal



narratives they told in describing family history and life history influences on their approaches to teaching United States history. Their stories echo the emergent themes of the study.

### Robert's Narrative

Robert frames his life story within the larger narrative of American meritocracy. He is now head of the history department at a private secondary school where he began teaching after retiring from 25 years of services in the army. He describes his life as a series of successes predicated on dedication and determination.

Robert is the son of first generation Americans who moved from New York City to the suburbs of New Jersey and provided, what he considers, an idyllic setting in which to mature and pursue his own talents and abilities. In describing his family background Robert tells several stories. An important theme that runs through his personal narrative is Robert's belief that his life experiences provide evidence of the efficacy of American institutions.

My father was pulled out of 6th grade, as he told me, by his German father. He said, "That's enough education for you. You've got to get to work...." He said he worked with his hands, and he would massage people in the '50's for \$3.00.... So what would that be? I wouldn't call it middle class, I would say lower middle, upper lower, or something like that. But it was nice. In a suburb of New York maybe eight miles west of New York City. It was a really nice place to grow up in the '50s and '60s ... I went to public schools. And I had a good mind, I guess. When I got to high school I worked hard. I was always a good athlete, also. I had a religion. I had a faith. I felt it was proper to do the best I could in school.... So I worked hard in high school, got into West Point, and did very well in West Point.

. . .The American taxpayer put me through West Point, so the system is rewarding me. The system is giving me opportunities. And also I am putting in a lot of good hard work, and motivation, and drive, and it is working.

In discussing his ideas about what is historically significant Robert is aware that his sense of which people, events, and ideas are important is influenced by his family's history, his life experiences, his career as an Army officer, and his doctoral degree in International Relations. He uses these various sources of personal and public knowledge, to inform his presentation of history in the classroom. Robert is aware that when and where he grew up and his years in the military influence his historical understandings and his beliefs about history education. However, his primary purpose in teaching history is not to pass on his knowledge but to develop the skill of discernment and evaluation in his students. He used a story about patriotism and baseball to explain how he positions himself in the classroom and encourages students to question knowledge sources.

Now even though this school does not articulate citizenship, I tell the kids that that's also one of my goals. They know who I am, and I make sure I remind them, you know? Make sure you realize who is telling you this. You know, I am a flag waver. American soldier. I was raised in northeast New Jersey, so if you ask me to write something about baseball, guess who you're going to hear about? I mean not only did I come from northeast New Jersey, I could see the Empire State Building out my bedroom window . . . . I grew up during those years, during the '50s and '60s, when the question was not whether the Yankees would make it to the World Series, the question was would they win the World Series? I mean, it was just crazy. The Yankee Dynasty. So it's not that I am a bad or an evil person. You ask me to write something about baseball, you're going to hear about Mickey

Mantle. I mean, that's just the way it is. No, you have to look at the source. I am not trying to put out misinformation, but it's just who I am. You have to judge critical thinking skills. You know, where are you hearing this from? Who wrote this, and what's that person's background?

Helping students connect with the personally relevant past is another of Robert's teaching priorities. While stationed in Germany he researched and wrote a family history that traced his lineage back several generations. This experience was very meaningful to him and he uses this personal knowledge to guide students through the process of conducting research with their elder relatives. He describes being particularly gratified with the intergenerational connections this family history assignment fosters.

I have always had good feedback, not only from the students, mainly, but I have actually had parents, you know, months later say, "Boy, you know? Johnny, he went up in the attic, and he opened up the cedar chest...Probably the most gratifying comment was from a boy who actually did it on his father... Well, this boy said because of this paper his father finally talked to him about Vietnam. So that made me feel good.

### Martin's Narrative

Like Robert, Martin sees his life experiences as emblematic of the American experience and relevant to his approach to teaching United States history. He became the history department head last year at Burns High School after teaching for 27 years in another building he described as the district's "White" high school. Now he is at a school with a large percentage of students of color and a large number of recent immigrants to the United States who are learning English as a second or third language. His school struggles to meet the needs of this population and he has been at the center of reform

efforts to improve curriculum and instruction. His way of thinking about history teaching is deeply rooted in his life experiences as a young man and as a father. Although Martin is not racially, ethnically, or linguistically similar to most of his students he considers himself “one of them.” He relates growing up poor in a rough part of town to the similar circumstances of his students.

I relate to these kids too, because I grew up here.... I’ve been in knife fights, and all that kind of stuff, growing up . . . I really do believe I understand these kids better than most people do. I’ve been a punk. I’ve been a troublemaker.

Martin’s understanding of himself and his students as “underdogs” motivates his work. While Martin doesn’t believe that “the system” is fair he does believe in hard work and the ability to achieve against the odds. His background shapes his desire to give students chances to succeed and his experiences as a father make him determined to provide the structures they need to do so. He described how parenting a child with developmental delays has shaped his approach to teaching.

My son helps me out. His disability.... He is 18 years old and his mind stopped developing when he was 18 months... try to put those two together where he’s at, and for me to teach him, or work with him, is a different mind set, a whole different mind set from anything that I have ever done.... I want him to get a glass of milk from the refrigerator. Go to the refrigerator, open the door, get the milk, close the door, bring the milk, get a glass, you know? What happens is he can’t do two things, he can’t mentally process two things at a time. It has to be one at a time. So that kind of thinking transfers here...the ability to break things down, understand them for what they are, you know? I have to get very creative in doing some very mundane things, whether it be making his bed, or tying his shoes, or

whatever. There has to be another way. I can't quit. And that's the same thing here.

Martin's life experiences contribute to his conviction that although the system may be rigged there is still a way to make it work. His approach to history education reflects his belief that all students should be offered high quality experiences that advance their academic skills and afford them dignity as learners. He is leading the efforts of his department and his school to create and implement standards that address the educational needs of newly arrived immigrants who comprise an increasingly large percentage of the students in his school district. Martin's approach to teaching, which he describes below, demonstrates his deep commitment to equity and access.

All the students will have an equal opportunity to get the same information. I am trying to get away from this elitist idea, while the dopey kids will get pabulum . . . we have a big ESL population here . . . . Now to say to them, "You're going to hand in a 10-15 page research paper." It's just not going to work, because they can't make every letter of the alphabet yet. But yet there still is an expectation. There is a standard to be met . . . . The school is not here for the teachers it is here for the students. This is what our students need . . . They need a background in economics, civics, government... These kids aren't American citizens and that needs to be taught here.

A desire to champion the underdog is rooted in his own identity as former "punk," his experiences as a father of son with severe developmental delays. Martin's description of himself as an educator is a reflection of who he was and is in the most personal parts of his family life. For Martin, academic standards are a tool to focus energy and attention on

student learning and not about the mastery of specific content. In his pragmatic efforts to find ways to engage students he rejects blind allegiance to the canon.

I've always kind of broken away from traditional things. I see things a little bit different. Maybe that's because of my background...If it doesn't work, it doesn't work. Let it go. A lot of the people try to force the issue, you know? Like in English class. We always got to read Hamlet ... Well, the kids aren't interested in Hamlet! Is there another way to go? They aren't getting it! I don't care whether that's right, or wrong, or whatever, but you have to find some vehicle to get through to these kids.

Martin explained that his emphasis on standards was not intended to standardize content. He is proud that students in his department are encouraged to pursue a semester long structured independent study. He also described with great satisfaction an interdisciplinary project that teachers from several departments helped organize in which students recreated a meal at a tavern circa 1845.

We worked with artisans and craftsmen. The sewing classes had some seamstresses come in that do historic clothing .... When you went there it was 1845. The kids from the Culinary Arts class cooked the food. They did research on the meals how they were prepared, and stuff back then.... I had presented the program to a local business, and they gave us a nice grant to do it. We did it the right way. ... We didn't get into a thing with the kids, "Well can't really make the costumes authentic, because we ain't got the money to get the right kind of fabric.".... The invitations and stuff were done on parchment, as opposed to mimeograph paper, because it's cheaper.

This project succeeded on many levels that are important to Martin. Students were engaged in difficult tasks of which they took ownership. They created an authentic representation that required sustained attention to ways in which the past was a different experience than the present. And their efforts were supported and celebrated by the larger community. All of these features represented real learning to Martin and he proudly showed off a display case in the main entrance of the school that contained items created for this event and which demonstrated “what these kids can do.”

### Teaching History: Telling Stories

Elbaz (1990) argues that the notion of story “most adequately constitutes and presents teachers’ knowledge (p. 33)” because this conceptualization describes the content and context of classroom activity. She asserts that understanding teaching as storytelling “keeps the teller of the story in focus (p.33)” as she crafts meaning and coherence in a selective presentation of the people, events, and ideas brought together in a tale she tells. Story keeps the audience firmly in mind because what counts as good or meaningful “depends on the listener who plays an active role in making sense of the story (p. 33).” This idea of story, then, embodies the ways in which teachers create and communicate knowledge as performers tuned to a student audience.

In their daily presentation of historical material teachers are in effect creating a unique narrative that incorporates elements of public as well as private histories. Creating and telling history stories is a common mode of instruction in history classrooms (Hamer, 1998; Evans, 1989). Hamer (1994) describes pedagogy in the history classroom as “oralized history” in which teachers use narrative to mediate “between the distant past and the familiar present” (p.4). Hamer contends that the narratives that teachers present in their history classrooms are “significant instances of individuals claiming the right and

authority to decontextualize stories canonized as nationally significant, and recontextualize them in the context of their own personal and local stories” (1998, p. 18).

Critical historians reject the modernist conception of history as an objective science capable of providing an unbiased, factual view of the past as it actually. Like postmodern and feminist scholars critical historians refute the notion that historical truth is “predefined, rational, and absolute...waiting to be discovered, accurately, through the adequate application of the scientific method” (Segall, 1999, p. 361). This framing of the discipline has produced an “idealized version of history as a picture-perfect presentation of an unmediated, authorless past (Segall, 1999, p.358). In this study I have argued that teachers as authors of history stories draw on personal as well as public narratives in creating classroom curriculum.

Understanding the study of history as the ongoing negotiation/creation of competing narratives requires a shift in focus from objectivity to subjectivity. Historical study necessarily becomes “the study and practice of interpretation” (Segall, 1999, p. 359, see also Scott, 1996). This critical approach shifts attention from “what is true?” to “what is truth, for whom, and why?” (Segall, p. 369). History education that is critical requires teachers and students to interrogate the ideological and identity positions that are embedded in any telling of the past. A more sophisticated, critical, and transparent approach to the examination of public and personal history narratives would illuminate the production, transmission, and consumption of history stories. A critical approach to history education with an increased awareness of the ways in which stories of the past are authored (and in many cases remain untold) offers the possibilities to invigorate historical inquiry and to empower the next generation to create new insights and meaning in our collective past.



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